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ABSTRACT

Rural communities have traditionally been overshadowed by urban centers, thus losing the political clout necessary for adequate rural social service program development/delivery. Social service delivery in rural areas is complicated by lack of power and organization and represents a complex interplay among values, beliefs, social organization, patterns of behavior, and patterns of cultural relationships, which, in turn, effect the social service delivery system. Empowerment which takes place at the community level may be used to counteract the overwhelming impact of plans conceived outside the community by persons who know little about rural residents. A vocal minority rural organizing model can lead to empowerment and impact on vertical decisionmaking bodies. The model encompasses a vocal minority who have a popular issue, dangerous or detrimental incident, or a large support group. If these are combined with an understanding of the community characteristics (ethnic/racial dominance, type of power structure, economy, political centralization, and cultural or religious restrictions) and leadership availability, access to power sources, or control of local decisionmaking, then empowerment and impacts on vertical decisionmaking bodies can be accomplished. (AH)

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THE VOCAL MINORITY

RURAL ORGANIZING MODEL

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VOCAL MINORITY RURAL ORGANIZING MODEL

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People in rural areas are more like people in non-rural areas than they are different from them. The differences lie in the economic, political, social and other institutional systems which shape the lives of rural people. Such systems are different than those in urban areas. In other words the problems of people living in rural areas must be viewed within the context of their unique social, economic, and political systems. Many of these systems have proven to be dysfunctional, exploitive and inadequate for specific groups in rural areas. Rural communities have been overshadowed by urban centers, thus losing the political and economic clout necessary for adequate rural program development. The most significant aspect of this is the manner in which the lives of individuals in rural society are affected and shaped due to the lack of an organized power base.

The problem of social service delivery in rural areas is thus complicated by the same lack of power and organization. The approach of the past two decades has been to develop rural programs from the level of a centralized government. But "Broad programs of social change require implementation at the level of individuals and groups to assure that their potential benefits will be realized."[1] (Perlman and Gurin). Because of this, social benefits are not actually impacting social problems in rural communities. The problem of social service delivery in the rural communities involves more than just a convenient location of facilities. It represents a complex interplay among

values and beliefs, social organization, patterns of behavior, and patterns of cultural relationships which, in turn, effect the social service delivery system.

In discussing the empowerment of rural communities, it is necessary to consider the interplay between the characteristics of rural society, the dynamics of rural culture, the social and political service systems, and the pattern of behavior of persons seeking assistance. The purpose of rural community empowerment is to develop an adaptive strategy which such communities may use to ensure the continuity of their traditions within the framework of developmental change and which the rural community may use to enhance the quality of life for themselves and the succeeding generations. Empowerment which takes place at the community level may be used to counteract the often overwhelming impact of plans conceived outside the community by persons who know little about the people for whom they are designing projects. The problems of rural location, mobility and population may be accomodated through the appropriate organization of a planning system and an empowerment approach which takes these factors into account.

In organizing for power within a rural community, one must be able to deal with economics, cultural varience and geographic isolation. In addition one must be able to understand the common normative positions of small, rural populations. Very fitting here is Alinsky's statement, "As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be."[2] (Alinsky).

Historical Approach to Rural Communities

The rural segment of America is differentiated by geographic section, religious and ethnic composition of its population, economic base and other socio-economic

divisions.[3] (Hassinger and Whiting). While agriculture is no longer the only leading industry in rural areas, it often remains central to rural social organization. Major changes in agriculture in many ways exemplify the recent developments in the rural segment of American society. These changes in rural America include the consolidation of local schools into larger school districts, the expansion of agricultural industry from small farmers to large agricultural business concerns, and the removal of ties to the land because of higher taxation and urban development. These changes have helped to break down rural community cohesiveness and strength. Rural communities are currently unable to resist outside dominance. Rural industries are no longer localized or independent. Mining, agriculture, forestry, and utilities, even hamburgers are centrally owned and standardized. The control of industry by multi-national corporations severly weakens the political power and independence of rural communities. The fact that standard social services are centralized requiring persons to leave their community, even for a short period of time, lessens the impact and personality of rural communities. Rural communities are moving from the gemeinschaft community to the gesellschaft community. Rural people are moving from personal relationships to contractual relationships.

Response of the Profession

The response of professional organizations to rural areas has been largely rhetorical. In 1977, the National Association of Social Workers began its policy statement on Social Work in Rural Areas by stating,"Social Work has its roots in urban America." Rural areas were characterized as pristine and folksy; self-help efforts, ice-cream socials, and a sympathetic minister

administering local social services. This stereotype was predominant and partially true until the Great Society and War on Poverty programs of the 1960's. Despite the fact that these programs were heavily oriented toward minority and low income persons in urban areas, each governmental program included a few human service jobs to rural areas. The upgrading of the social services section of public welfare also increased opportunities for social work practice in rural areas. Although NASW had its heart in the right place and believed that there should be "federal policies developed and programs designed to provide for the unique identification of rural people, their problems, and needs," the professional organizations never viewed rural areas or rural people as being of much importance. The money was not there. The funds were not there. The recognition was not there. The political clout was not there. One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Friere).

Paolo Friere's term "conscientizacao" summarized the ideology lacking in most professional approaches to rural communities. "Conscientizacao" requires that one learns to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and takes action against them. When professionals look at the rural communities and determine that it is the responsibility of the federal government, thousands of miles away and eons separated, the professional community has not yet perceived that the important part of the rural community is the <u>people</u> of that community. "A real professional can be identified more by his trust in people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust." (Friere). The focus of professional approaches to rural

communities should be on the removal of cultural and geographic isolation and on the elevation of the status of the rural populace. Whether the rural person is Black, Mexican-American, Indian, English, Female, or from other cultural, ethnic or sexual extraction, the emphasis must be to include those persons in the overall cultural desires of the dominant society as a whole. What has been ignored in the approach to the rural communities may be wrong. What has been ignored in the approach to the rural communities is that the rural communities may be right and the urban communities may be wrong. "Perhaps the Native Americans' relationship to the land and to nature is more realistic in today's world than ours. Perhaps the Mexican-American family structure with clear roles and rules and interrelationships would be more supportive of the concept of loyalty to family and government" which is being espoused by the leadership of today. (Magel).

Over a hundred years ago, in an 1862 report to President Lincoln, the federal government and the state governments "discovered" that there were "problems in rural America." Those problems have lingered for a century and have never been addressed. For a brief period of time in the 1950's and 1960's there was political power in the rural communities because the states had grown with large urban centers encompassing the majority of people, but the state legislative bodies had not changed their representative styles so that the rural areas were more heavily represented in the state legislatures than were the urban areas. Roads, services, water projects and agriculture received an undue share of state tax dollars. But with the advent of the one-man, one-vote ruling by the United States Supreme Court, the rural areas were transported backwards to obscurity. Present political approaches to rural communities

follow present service delivery approaches to the same communities - once a month a mobile home is dragged into town and once a month, at the proper time, you can complain to your politician or receive your tetanus shot. Power in rural areas is more and more controlled by vertical mechanisms such as economic bosses of multi-national corporations. Even the old methods of local union busting is now unnecessary because union negotiations are performed in a far off city by persons living in an urban setting.

Model of Organizing in Rural Communities

The rural communities have been ignored because it has been assumed that the small scale of life implies simplicity. There also exists the idea of the coming extinction of rural American in the United States. This is based on the assumption that as rural America becomes interlaced with urban America because of suburbanization, rural America will disappear. Conventional wisdom suggests that rural/urban differences will make urban newcomers to rural areas less satisfied with the present condition of things. In a study by Sofranko and Fliegel, however, it was found that this was not the case. The data showed that urban newcomers differed little from residents in their perspective on growth and development.

The first question that must be asked in developing a model for empowerment in rural communities is "to what extent does the utilization of power, influence and decision-making shape and maintain a political system which perpetuates unfair resource allocation to rural areas?"

The rural community has two strengths in organizing for power - its invisibility and its visibility. The invisibility of the rural community makes it less of a threat to the urban community because it is small, it is innocuous,

and it is out there beyond the mountains or across the rivers. That same invisibility makes the rural community a very visible commodity in terms of politics. The rural politician's contacts with his constituency must be made in the community centers which exist, i.e., the rural community centers. "Most local elected officials are busy, part-time amateurs. Their authority is highly decentralized. Many of them are motivated to satisfy their constituents in order to get re-elected. And they usually are reluctant to take action unless the liklihood of opposition is negligible." (Hahn).

Any standard book on political organization or on how to run a grass roots campaign may be utilized to develop a political campaign in a rural area. Almost any textbook on community power structures may be utilized to determine whether the power structure in a rural community is pyramidal, factional, coalitional or amorphous. Any book on neighborhood organizing may be utilized to assist in identifying those people who can get things accomplished, to identify the formal and informal leadership, to develop social participation and indigenous cooperation and any book on opinion research can provide methods for measuring the beliefs, desires and needs of a local community. You make your own choice by your value systems.

Various rural communities are likely to encourage different patterns of power and leadership and are likely to be treated differently by outside decision-making bodies. Although it has long been assumed that community size has a direct relation to community importance in vertical decision making matters, it is not true in the majority of political decisions. The impact of a rural community in political affairs is directly related to the

activity of that rural community and not to its size. A rural community which actively involves itself in the vertical power chain, or in which a small group of activists involve themselves, is more likely to be catered to than a larger community which concerns itself with local issues and is not actively involved in vertical decision making.

It is a fact, although a sad fact, that what must be encouraged in rural communities in order to compete with the urban community is a "mobilization of bias." (Clark).

It is sadly necessary for rural communities to understand that democracy has never been coterminous with wide participation in decision making processes. It is therefore necessary for rural communities to utilize the resources available to impact the larger society to a greater degree than the numbers of people in that rural community would indicate. Terry Clark, in his book Community Power and Policy Outputs, outlines a formula for the pyramiding of power. Clark says that influence is directly equal to the number of resources multiplied by the probability of activitation of those resources.

$$I = Re \times AcP$$

INFLUENCE	=	RESOURCES	x	ACTIVATION PROBABILITY
		People	x	Involvement
		Money	x	Expenditure
		Land	x	Development
		Charisma	x	Leadership
		Religion	x	Condemnation or reward
		Social Access	x	Time commitment
		Knowledge	x	Application
		Jobs, etc.	x	Employment, etc.

In other words, while one group may control a large number of resources - i.e., minority communities control large numbers of potential voters - unless there is a certain probability of activation of those resources there can be no utilization of influence based on those resources. It is the contention of the authors that a vocal minority is the best way to organize for power in rural communities.

The Vocal Minority

In urban centers it is very easy to produce large numbers of people for a wide variety of issues. In a city of a million people, putting together one thousand people to rally for an issue will make headlines, receive television coverage, and be seen as a group having some wide support. But one thousand people is one-tenth of one percent in a city of a million people. In a rural community which has a population of one thousand people, one-tenth of one percent would be one person. That single individual would receive little coverage and little recognition of support. The rural organizing model proposed in this paper requires that a vocal minority organize within a local community.

This vocal minority, be it 5 or 10 people, must be willing to constantly be vocal and must be willing to stand up when no one is standing with them. It is the contention of the authors that there are five basic phases in rural organizing to reach a level of enpowerment for rural groups (see chart, page 11). We will not review the steps of the problem solving model. Nor will we outline the strategies or methodologies as proposed by Roland Warren, George Braeger or Harry Specht or even Saul Alinsky. These methodologies are

readily available and their strategies are applicable. We will say that we believe that anyone can utilize the problem solving model and that anyone can utilize a community organizing methodology. We are proposing that rural areas use any one of what must be many ways to utilize those models and methodologies. The five stages of rural organizing proposed in this paper are aimed at special requirements and at varied approaches.

In an urban area the number of issues, the number of incidents, and the number of supporters is always great because there are more to choose from. But as we noted earlier, the first step in rural organizing is to develop a vocal minority. This primary group, the vocal minority, can be few in number, but must be willing to be loud and to be present constantly. The vocal minority must decide that its basic aim is empowerment and that other issues which may arise during the process will be set aside until after the vocal minority has developed a power base and has stabilized a process for using that power base successfully.

Second, the vocal minority must choose a popular issue in the local community, or the vocal minority must cite a dangerous or detrimental incident in the community, or the vocal minority must recruit a large number of peripheral supporters for utilization in its organizing methodology. Any of these three items, an issue, an incident, or a mob, followed by an analysis and understanding of at least five major community characteristics, will allow the vocal minority to move forward.

Thirdly, the vocal minority must 1) analyze and understand the ethnic and racial dominance of the community and must decide whether it will join with

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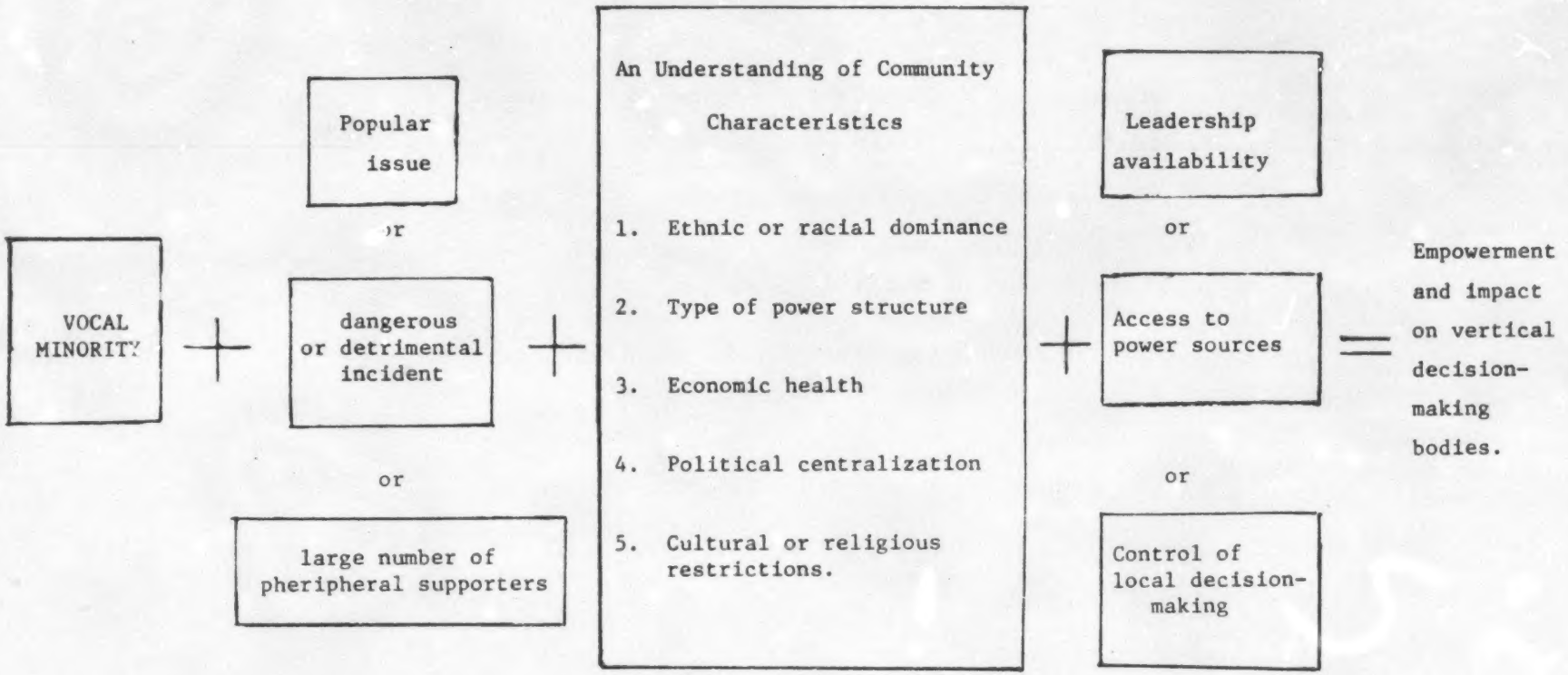
VOCAL MINORITY RURAL ORGANIZING MODEL



or attack that dominance. 2) analyze and understand the type of power structure in the community and decide whether it will attempt to replace the top of the pyramidal power structure or become one of the factions in a factional power structure. 3) analyze and understand the economic health of the community and decide whether it will join with the healthy growth of the community, stand in the way of detrimental growth in the community or call for a redirection of unhealthy growth in the community. 4) analyze and understand whether the community is part of a political centralization or whether the community is outside present political horizontal structure. The vocal minority must then decide whether it will be another voice in an already existing politically centralized community or whether it will become the only voice in a community that has no strength in the political world. 5) analyze and understand the cultural and religious restrictions of the community, or at least the majority of the community, that it will be dealing with. If those religious restrictions deny certain types of actions and require certain kinds of supports, the vocal minority must work within that framework without imposing additional values upon that framework.

The fourth step occurs once an understanding of the community characteristics exists. There are three avenues available to empowerment. The first of these is the availability of indigenous leadership through natural leaders or easily developed leaders who can be seen and projected as persons whom other people will follow. If appropriate leadership is not available then access to power sources must be developed. Those sources can be religious or financial or job related or union related or related to a wide variety of other items. That access must be developed and utilized to bring yet another type of recognition

to the vocal minority. If access to the sources of power is not possible then the vocal minority must look to control of the local decision making process. In many communities this would mean local involvement as precint committee people or as school board members, or as local council members. The control of decision making may also be realized by the control of staffing positions with local officials, by providing specific information to assist local officials, or by providing bodies to vote for or work for local officials. Any of these three approaches may be utilized by the vocal minority.

Conclusion

If the vocal minority has chosen a popular issue and stayed with it, or has chosen a dangerous incident and hammered it home, or has recruited a large number of supporters and utilized them sparsely, but appropriately, and, if the vocal minority has analyzed and understood the characteristics of its community and has developed input and control of decision making on a local level, then the fifth step will be community empowerment and an impact on the vertical decision making bodies affecting that community.

In 1968, Saul Alinsky stood in the streets of Chicago and, when the young radicals who had just spent months working for Eugene McCarthy came to him and said that they were disappointed and that they wanted nothing to do with the system because they had attempted to work in the system and the system had betrayed them, Alinsky gave them an answer that neither he, nor they like, but which seemed to be the only realistic answer. "Go home, organize,

build power, and at the next convention, you be the delegates." The vocal minority will be laughed at and yelled at and criticized because they are not a broad based group. But a rural community must fight for its recognition and the vocal minority is an approach to leading that fight. The Vocal Minority Rural Organizing Model is not new. One hundred and twenty-five years ago Frederick Douglas called on the Black people of the United States to demand their equality. He said,"

> Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.
>
> This struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand.
>
> It never did, and it never will. Find out just what people will submit to, and you will find the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them. And these will continue until they are resisted with either words or blows or with both.
>
> The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

Rural communities are disenfranchised, disregarded, and disembowled. They are owned by companies who live in the large urban centers. They are used by politicians who disregard them. They will never be of one mind of any one issue. This Vocal Minority Rural Organizing Model is offered as an approach

to consistent empowerment for rural communities.

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